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## **Abstract and Concrete Universals:** **Basic Services, Basic Infrastructure, Basic Income**

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[Recent contributions](#) to *Futures of Work* have focused on the possibilities and limitations of the Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a response to an imminent utopia of automated worklessness. But the UBI is only one example of increasing policymaker interest in ‘universal’ solutions to the intractable contradictions of contemporary work, wage and welfare. The rollout of Universal Credit is the most notorious example of what happens when a premature claim to universality meets the stratified and complex character of our world. But what forms of universality project a better path? And are some ‘universals’ better than others?

In considering this we might loosely paraphrase Hegel, [who distinguished between ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ universals](#). Does the UBI represent an ‘abstract universal’, forcing particularity and difference into dominating forms of premature identity under free money and an even more powerful state? And are other options available, closer in spirit to what we might call ‘concrete universals’ that seek to capture and not cleanse the world of specificity and contradiction? In posing these questions we compare [Universal Basic Services](#) (UBS) and [Universal Basic Infrastructure](#) (UBIS).

### **Universal Basic Services**

The first, Universal Basic Services (UBS), was [recently proposed](#) by the Social Prosperity Network at University College London’s Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP). UBS is a proposal to take the provision of certain necessities out of the commodity sphere and provide them free of charge to anyone who needs or wants them. The IGP report proposes to extend the free status of the NHS to seven basic services provided to citizens for free, namely health care, education, democracy and legal services, shelter, food, transport, and information so as to fulfill the public objectives of safety, opportunity and participation.

Taking basic needs out of commodified relations and overcoming the crisis of ‘access’ to basic needs beyond the realm of waged work, the UBS revives the relevance and scope of state provision not only to ensure equitable access, but to enable economies of scale and scope. Applied to a UK context, it adds to the existing provision of public goods – healthcare, education and legal/democratic rights – the provision of shelter, food, transport and information. For instance, the report’s proposal for the UK suggests £13bn expenditure on new social housing at zero rent, £4bn on free meals for 2.2m households in food insecurity, £5bn on the extension of the free bus pass scheme to people of all ages, and £20bn on making phone, internet and the TV licence free for all.

The problem UBS proposes to address is conceived by its proponents along economic and political axes. In the economic sphere, this account suggests, the sharp rise in earnings inequality owes principally to technological change. Increased manufacturing productivity displaces from production employees with easily-automatable skills, favouring those with analytical and cognitive skills suited to new

information technologies. This has created, the UBS report suggests, an hourglass job market characterised by job creation at the top and bottom ends of the income scale, albeit with rising wages at the top and falling wages below. Meanwhile, in the political sphere, support for redistributive tax and benefit policies capable of addressing some of this fallout from technological change has declined.

UBS proponents arguably have a more realistic appraisal of the fallout from technological change than many advocates of the UBI. The IGP report suggests that the reason that neither the full utopian or dystopian ramifications of automation and all the rest are not yet clearly visible, “may be that automation simply functions to displace workers from one type of low-skilled employment to another, resulting in increased insecurity without any gain in wages or productivity.” This trend itself bodes ill for the political feasibility of redistributive measures to address new inequalities sparked by automation, of which UBI is one. The returns on any productivity gains from automation will likely go to those with ‘scarce inputs’ and skills who can therefore command a higher wage. But this scarcity implies a smaller subsection of people on which to place a greater tax burden, and an attendant decrease in the capacity of the state to finance ongoing public expenditure on redistribution through the tax system. As such UBS can be seen to take a ‘predistributive’ rather than ‘redistributive’ approach.

To some extent, UBS is ‘inspired by’ the UBI, as the IGP report puts it. Indeed, some proposals include a UBI component. The report suggests that UBS and UBI can be ‘complementary’ insofar as the latter assumes the provision of social welfare services and the former the possibility that some kind of monetary provision may be necessary to allow some citizens an active part in society. However, under the UBS model proposed by the IGP report, the UBI would only be £20 per week, so hardly at the level of subsistence proposed by some advocates of a basic income.

Indeed, it might be said that the UBS can be considered as an alternative to the UBI. As [we have suggested elsewhere](#), the UBI insufficiently confronts the conditions that separate individuals from the means of social reproduction in the first place. But in a more direct way than the UBI, UBS sets out to address head-on what the Social Prosperity Network refer to as “the difference between the cost of basic living and available income.” Spending on basic services, as opposed to giving money to citizens themselves, “dramatically reduces the cost of basic living for those on the lowest incomes.” The provision of “housing, food, communications and transport,” on top of some of the existing basic provision of healthcare and education free at the point of use, is “far more effective at driving down the cost of living than spending the same money on existing services, or on redistribution,” such as that effectively posited in conceptualisations of the UBI. That being said, the UBS does not address child care or care for the elderly.

UBS is presented by the report’s authors as the move from a “primarily redistributive model for social security to a primarily service-oriented model.” UBS would, in this respect, “replace much of the current conditional benefits system, while also preserving the value of remuneration.” To this extent, it preserves the role of the wage but does not propose to conceal it within the universality of a direct state payment to facilitate the reproduction of labour-power, as is the case with the UBI. Indeed, UBS, its proponents claim, overcomes problems associated with other options like the UBI by “satisfying differentiated needs,” garnering political acceptability through its

incremental affordability, and “preserving the intrinsic value of monetary reward for contribution.”

However, in preserving remuneration for labour in this way, the UBS still sets itself apart from the pursuit of higher wages as the principal means through which the struggle for better standards of living progresses. UBS is presented as an alternative to a higher minimum wage because the latter “only reduces poverty if it is set high, and if it is high work will be decreased, compliance reduced and/or prices raised.” UBS, on the other hand, in effect increases the amount of the existing wage workers are able to keep by decommodifying services so that people do not have to spend their hard-earned cash on them. This decommodifying purpose sets it apart from the UBI, whilst still achieving the outcome desired by proponents of the UBI insofar as it would make underpaid and undervalued marginal activities essential to economy and society both viable and sustainable to perform. The difference is that the UBS ‘meets needs more directly’ than the UBI.

It does so by addressing poverty as a question of access to necessities as opposed to simply granting more money with which to acquire them. It thereby focuses on the opportunities created by the right material conditions rather than the outcome of having an equal amount of money, and encourages the construction of a new civil society of collective assets through which these opportunities can be realised. As such, rather than emptying out the ‘institutional fabric’ between citizen and state – as some might suggest UBI does – the Social Prosperity Network report proposes that “UBS require social institutions and support the development of public service infrastructure.” In this way, where the basic income “arguably does little or nothing [...] to reverse social atomisation, UBS could be ‘pro-social;’ publicly provided services are a visible collective good, and both providing them and consuming them is at least in part a social activity.”

### **Universal Basic Infrastructure**

To some extent UBS resonates with another ‘universal’ approach to the key political-economic challenges of the age: Universal Basic Infrastructure (UBIS). This concept is presented in the [Industrial Strategy Commission](#) (ISC) report to the government, its leading proponent the economist [Diane Coyle](#). The problem UBIS proposes to solve is that the UK sustains a severe lack of investment in infrastructure. For the ISC report’s authors, “investment in new technologies and their diffusion” requires improvements in the UK’s currently ‘weak’ hard infrastructure in areas like rail, energy, fixed and mobile broadband and fibre, and electric and autonomous vehicles. Moreover, the UK’s soft infrastructure, i.e. “investment in human capital through universal education and health and social care services” is not properly funded in the current political conditions and as such weakens living standards and ‘economic potential’. The current lack of these kinds of infrastructural components reduces the UK’s propensity to attract the most innovative and productive global firms.

The UBIS thus responds to deficits in both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ infrastructure on the basis that it will improve work and economic life in the contemporary UK. Proposals for a UBI make similar claims vis-à-vis the requirement to adjust to a new age of technological innovation and disruption. But, for the authors of the UBIS report, the basic income may give recipients money, but does not provide opportunities to “buy a transport network or high-quality education system for their town or city,” which would

offer increased opportunities for better work and life. The UBI is an individualised payment with no collective component around which to construct new civil society institutions and infrastructures sitting between citizen and state. It is, as Diane Coyle states in a [recent interview with Open Democracy](#), an individual response to collective problems: :

Whenever there's fear about automation destroying lots of jobs, the idea of basic income comes back into fashion. And for me it doesn't go far enough. It is an individual solution to collective problems, because if you're given an income, never mind that it's not going to be a particularly large one, there's a lot you can't do with your own individual income. I couldn't take my money out and make sure the roads get mended, or that there's a good public transport system, or there are good schools for my children to go to. So the idea of Universal Basic Infrastructure is that you give people everywhere agency by giving them the assets to make what they want of their lives. So this includes soft infrastructure but you make sure there's a minimum standard at their school, a minimum standard in healthcare, the connectivity they need, the transport they need to travel and work wherever they want to.

Universal Basic Services, and its close relative Universal Basic Infrastructure, represent alternatives to UBI. They mitigate some issues and break the individualising link with money inherent in the UBI. In so doing they address much more directly the constrained basis of individual and collective reproduction that characterises capitalist social relations. They also retain layers of civil society mediating the relationship between the individual and the state, rather than the isolating dependence upon individuals and the state as wage payer of first resort. UBS and UBIS may therefore empower social actors without implying to quite such a degree their individual subservience to money or the state, keeping open to a much greater extent the possibility of struggle for alternatives that gesture towards other kinds of society.

However, both UBS and UBIS still ultimately argue for top-down support from the state without necessarily building any real capacity for collective action, collective organisation and collective struggle from the bottom up. They still rely upon the abstract social forms of which capitalist society is constituted – not so much on money as in the UBI, but certainly the state as itself a form of capitalist social relations dependent on taxes from expanded capitalist wealth and profits. In common with UBI, these 'universal' demands are all addressed within individual nation states, suggesting as such that this 'universality' is limited to an identifiable, unanimous 'people' that could be all too easily identified with nativist projects of national renewal.

That said, both UBS and UBIS propose non-monetary ways past the impasses of the UBI. But all the same they retain a link with capitalist social forms of money and state that may serve to close rather than open the path to real alternatives. In pursuit of the latter the contradictions they seek to address might best be mediated through more bottom-up, struggle-based means of addressing the manifold crises of work, wage and social democracy that undergird them. This would leave open the dynamic tensions around work and welfare in contemporary capitalism without promise of their incomplete resolution in the name of a false universality unattainable in a world characterised by antagonism, domination and crisis.